



BOOK REVIEW:
Annorstädes [Elsewhere]

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Bark Persson, Anna. *Annorstädes*. Vendels förlag, 2021. ISBN 978-9198663655.

Annorstädes [English: *Elsewhere*; all translations my own] is a collection of essays written in Swedish, mostly on SF literature, but also on other speculative fiction genres such as fantasy and horror. The collection comprises no less than 22 brief essays with a preface by the publisher Johan Jönsson at Vendels förlag. The preface gives a brief suggestion of what SFF are genre-wise and how they work, probably for making the collection more accessible not only for the already informed reader, but also for a broader public. Furthermore, Jönsson states that SF studies in Swedish academia is still in its infancy compared to Finland – although I would argue that the situation has improved a lot the last two decades. Finally, Jönsson gives a short history of the Swedish fantasy and SF fandom, including Bark Persson’s involvement in these circles. According to Jönsson, Bark Persson – with one foot in fandom, and one foot in academia – combines the “enthusiast’s love to the books with the critic’s will to not just understand but also to disentangle and explain” when she analyzes speculative fiction (17).¹ This enthusiasm, I suspect, also explains why Bark Persson has chosen the essay format, which makes it possible to invite fans as well as academics to keep the conversation going on SFF from many perspectives. The essays can thus be read by a broader public without any generic competence in speculative fiction. With this in mind, Bark Persson provides her readers a fine and very well-written collection of essays that bridge the (sometimes alleged) gap between academia and other publics.

¹ Original quote: “kombinerar entusiastens kärlek till böckerna med kritikerns vilja att inte bara förstå utan också att reda ut och förklara” (17).

However, it should be noted that the classic essay format or genre, in the Montaignean understanding of the word, is not often used in Swedish academia, let alone in writings on speculative fiction. Monographs and traditional scientific articles are the norm, while the essay format has been passed over with some suspicion for being not “academic” enough. And the essay format has its pros and cons, of course. On one hand, it allows Bark Persson to ask interesting questions on typical genre conventions in speculative fiction and discuss them in a limited text space. For example, on generation starships in the essay “Generations skepp och det stora tidsspännat” (“Generation Starships and the Great Time Span”): are generation starships really a good idea? What are the moral and ethical implications with letting generations of inhabitants on the spaceship die before they reach their destination? Is it possible from a psychosocial point of view to keep a population in a narrow confines for long time spans?

On the other hand, Bark Persson’s wide range of topics (e.g., family relations, robots and AI, queer escapism, post-apocalypse literature, and the planet Mars) and authors mentioned (Ann Leckie, Ted Chiang, Lewis Carroll, Catherynne Valente, Kim Stanley Robinson, Liz Williams, Jo Walton, John Kessel, Ada Palmer, and many others) may make one wonder if Bark Persson has enough page space to discuss them in some depth. However, this depends on how the questions around different topics are formulated, and mostly Bark Persson is careful enough to narrow her discussion down to a scale where she can do passingly good analysis (or at least make some interesting observations) in a quite limited space.

Bark Persson herself uses a theoretical toolkit borrowing perspectives mainly from Gender Studies, and many of the essays are interconnected through this toolkit but also through recurring themes such as generation starships (as already mentioned). The feminist and gender perspectives are outlined in the first essay, “Om feministisk science fiction och drömlaboratorium” (“On Feminist Science Fiction and Dream Laboratory”), which sets the tone for the collection. Rather than demand that feminist experiments in SF should function as blueprints for a utopian society, for example, Bark Persson argues that we should not act as a “kind of moral oracle or architect where the goal is to construct the most perfect or feasible vision of an equal future world” (23–24). Instead, feminist SF acts as a *dream laboratory*, a “space where feminism, at least in theory, has almost no limitations for what is possible to explore, discuss and test” (23).² It grants authors the opportunity to play with style, characters, gender conventions, counterfactual history, and more. One might also think of the sub-genres of critical utopias and critical dystopias here (see, e.g., Baccolini and Moylan; Godhe 2010). They conceptualize the development of social (especially feminist) SF in the 1960s and onwards in terms of abandoning blueprint utopias for more complex discussions of possible worlds and possible futures where essentialist notions of gender were contested, the Western belief in technological and scientific

² Original quote: “som något slags moraliskt orakel eller arkitekt där målet är att konstruera den mest perfekta eller rimliga visionen av en jämställd framtida värld”; “ett rum där feminism åtminstone i teorin närapå helt saknar begränsningar för vad som är möjligt att utforska, diskutera och prova på” (23–24).

progress was deconstructed, and human exceptionalism was eventually contested as well.

Without acting as a moral oracle, Bark Persson both embraces and criticizes how representations in mostly SF literature work as a dream laboratory. In one essay, Bark Persson examines the pros and cons of matriarchal utopias in John Kessel's SF novel *The Moon and the Other* (2017) with references to Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (1915) and other SF works. A common aspect of many matriarchal utopias is that since biology seems to be humanity's destiny, there is only one way to have equal societies free from violence, namely, to force men to be second-class citizen or simply abolish them. According to Bark Persson, Kessel indeed shows how matriarchal utopias and women separatist worlds emanate from a kind of biological determinism, but Kessel does not fully use the potential to investigate this problem. For example, biological determinism in matriarchal utopias poses a problem for an intersectional feminism that includes transgender issues. Nevertheless, stories on matriarchal utopias and women separatist worlds still have the potential to contest essentialist notions of sex and gender, of what is biologically "natural" for women and by extension for men.

Overall, there are an abundance of ideas and threads throughout this volume, but unfortunately I cannot discuss every essay. Particularly worth mentioning, though, are one of the two essays dedicated to Ursula K. Le Guin. In "Det finns ingen feminism på Vinter" ("There is no Feminism on Winter"), Bark Persson returns to the ambivalent reception of Le Guin's ground-breaking novel *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969). In the novel, the male protagonist from a planet federation including Earth is visiting the planet Winter, a place where the inhabitants have only one sex. Bark Persson places the novel in the context of radical feminism. When it was published, the reception was more mixed, and Le Guin was criticized for reproducing patriarchal structures, something she later regretted. The societies on Winter portrayed by Le Guin, as Bark Persson points out, are masculine, and the characters are neither androgyn nor neuter, but rather just men able to become pregnant. Throughout the novel the protagonist uses the personal pronouns "he" or "him". So, *The Left Hand of Darkness's* feminist perspective may, for a modern reader, be somewhat outdated and a disappointment, according to Bark Persson, but, instead, the "anticipated radicalism is installed in the past" when the novel was first published (157).³ Bark Persson works out a proposal for a sympathetic reading in her conclusion in the essay. Although *The Left Hand of Darkness* was maybe not as radical or confrontative as Joanna Russ's ground-breaking novel *The Female Man* from 1976, Bark Persson suggests that "maybe we should locate the novel's feminist potential somewhere else instead, to be able to do it justice" (158).⁴ This is true, and maybe Bark Persson could have elaborated more on that "somewhere else". On the other hand, the essay's aporetic ending is also a way of asking readers to make sense of the novel themselves – and, once again, of refusing to position herself as a moral oracle or architect.

³ Original quote: "Istället installeras den förväntade radikaliteten i dåtiden" (157).

⁴ Original quote: "Kanske borde vi istället lokalisera romanens feministiska potential någon annanstans, för att kunna göra den rättvisa" (158).

Finally, the last essay “Science fiction vid världens ände” (“Science Fiction at the End of the World”) is maybe the most interesting piece in the collection. In the typical manner of the essay format, i.e., by starting with asking a question or by making an argument to evolve around and be discussed from different angles, Bark Persson states that she believes that “science-fiction literature had slowly but surely began losing its role as *Zeitgeist* literature” (218). This can also be interpreted as a rhetorical question: “Has it?” Considering the postmodern mistrust of the Enlightenment belief in the Modern Western project, particularly the notion of progress, and how SF and its subgenres have changed, as I read some the context for Bark Persson’s arguments, Bark Persson remarks that time has “caught up with the SF genre and its, and our, dreams”. The multifaceted vocabulary of the future offered by SF must make way for “another vocabulary, other ways of understanding the world, society, culture, and the systems, changes, and power shifts that shape and reshape them” (224–25).⁵

As Bark Persson herself points out, this is not the first time someone has proclaimed the pending death of the SF genre, and in any circumstance, I am not sure that the closing essay of the collection has convinced me of the end of SF. It is rather possible to see her essay as the beginning of an ongoing discussion on the reinvented SF genre, especially in times when non-Western SF is discussed more than ever in conferences, articles, and books. It is there the vocabulary has changed and where “other ways of understanding the world, society, culture, and the systems, changes, and power shifts that shape and reshape them” are explored. If this is SF per se or just genre hybridity, however, is another question.

All in all, *Annorstädes* is a vivid and fluid collection of often interconnected essays. Even if many essays could have benefited from more development, the page space allotted is mostly enough since the themes are so clearly outlined. From the beginning of the collection to the last thought-provoking essay, Bark Persson’s arguments are easy to follow. The language is lucid and eloquent, and Bark Persson’s theoretical toolkit nonetheless keeps the jargon to a minimum. This makes the collection available for a broader public without over-simplifying matters. A certain acquaintance with or knowledge of speculative fiction genres, the authors and filmmakers mentioned, and some of the theories used is, of course, an advantage, but in my opinion the collection has the potential to interest laymen as well as academics not usually concerned with speculative fiction genres.

Hopefully, Anna Bark Persson’s in many ways excellent collection of essays can also inspire more Swedish speculative fiction scholars (with or without one foot in fandom) to use the essay format.

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⁵ Original quote: “tror att science fiction-litteraturen sakta men säkert har börjat förlora sin roll som *zeitgeist*-litteratur” (218); “har hunnit ifatt sf-genren, och våra, drömmar”; ”får stå tillbaka för en annan vokabulär, andra sätt att förstå världen, samhället, kulturen och de system, förändringar och maktskiften som formar och omformar dem” (224–25).

Future Studies” (co-written with Luke Goode) in the journal *Culture Unbound*, and the themed issue of *Culture Unbound*, on Critical Future Studies (co-edited with Luke Goode). ORCID ID 0000-0002-3259-9754.

Works Cited

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